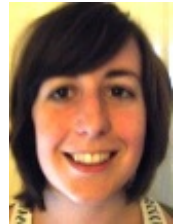


# How taking a gendered perspective can refresh tired studies of power in the EU

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*Successfully challenging many peoples' views of the EU as a tired and dry field of study is a hard thing to achieve, but in this recent book Johanna Kantola provides a refreshingly nuanced view of gendered power in the EU, describing the emergence of gender as a significant issue on the EU agenda and the impact of its policies on gender inequality. **Amy Watson** finds it to be a surprisingly fascinating read through which we can better understand the workings of the EU.*



**Gender and the European Union. Johanna Kantola. Palgrave Macmillan. 285 pages.**

## Find this book:

In *Gender and the European Union*, [Johanna Kantola](#) argues that gendered governmental power exists at local, regional, national, and EU levels. At every level of the shifting set of multi-sited, interacting institutions and processes that are the EU, gendered and gendering systems of power constantly (re)produce feminized and masculinised subjects in line with endorsed norms. Kantola's framework echoes Judith Butler's understanding of gender as form of 'being', a repeated performance the values of which the state – or similarly pervasive institutions – has a role in forming. Students of the EU will probably find this sociological turn unexpected.

Kantola's gendered view of Europeanization challenges a number of typical assumptions about political neutrality, and emphasises a managerialist form of governance which has the potential to exact subtle and hidden changes on national gender equality policies. She also suggests that a productive route for further research would be to extend analysis of forms of Europeanization to foreign and neighbourhood policies.

This all provides appealing sociological aspects to what could otherwise be a very technical analysis of the EU. Her work suggests there is a lot more mileage in this field, particularly with regards to understanding the tensions and discrepancies between different actors' norms and actions in different settings.

Kantola also does justice to multiple meanings

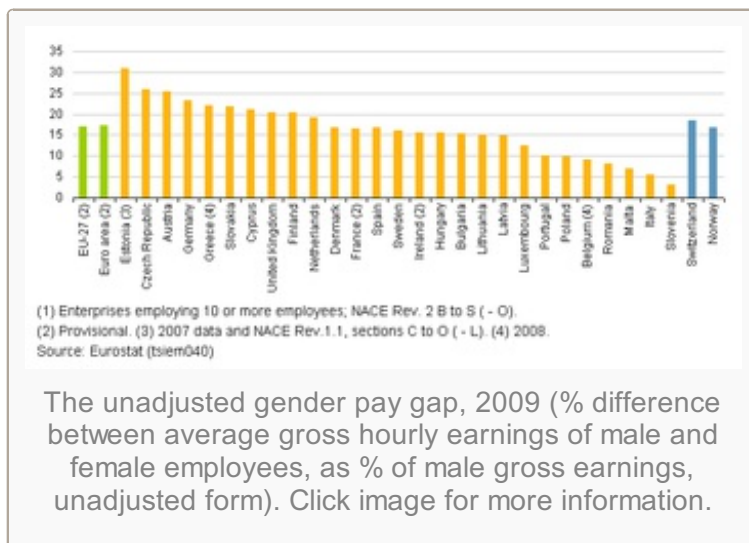


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of 'gender equality' across Europe, acknowledging that equality in one context may mean a mother's right to primarily care for her children in her own home, whereas another may identify equality as pursuing paid employment in the labour market.

She acknowledges a big feminist critique of the EU, the accusation that "it reduces all questions of inequality and exclusion to problems of employability or functioning of the economy and market" (p. 20), presenting women's commodification in the labour market as the route to independence and gender equality. This taps into a huge tension within the functioning and values of the EU – social rights occupy a weak position in the EU 'gender regime', often subservient to economic values. As such, the EU is frequently seen as constructing a narrow vision of gender equality, specifically one based on sameness, where the aim is to provide women with equal opportunities on the basis of the male norm. Gendered views of the EU often grapple with some fundamental dilemmas in relation to the its norms – "how compatible are market values, competition, efficiency and productivity with gender equality?" (p. 21).



This is an important emerging issue, and is a testament to the timely nature of this research. Kantola raises concerns about the process of negotiating the Lisbon Treaty, casting doubt on the EU's claims of participation, consultation and openness amid concerns about watering down and weakening of provisions, for example with regards to equal pay or positive action. She also suggests future tensions with regards to negotiating multiple equality strands, and the dominance of an Anglo-Dutch view of anti-discrimination which has tended to eschew positive action.

Kantola concludes that the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) combined with gender mainstreaming "has increased the complicity of gender equality with the market-driven notions of what constitutes equality" (p. 23). It would be interesting to see Kantola develop these ideas in relation to current debates about neoliberalism, such as whether or not the EU represents a state form which harnesses the market in order to impose market values on citizenship (Wacquant, 2012).

This book covers a wide range of subjects, and owing to both its focus on gender and its theoretical framework will provide a novel perspective to anyone studying the EU, particularly when compared to other textbooks on the subject. Kantola manages to document and analyse technical and legal apparatus (which will be useful for more general students of EU policy), without losing a focus on processes, discourses, actors and the changing, seemingly negotiable role of gender equality policies. This latter aspect, and adept combination of detail and supra-national scope, makes this work far more interesting and unique.

For example, Kantola connects the increasing importance of the principle of subsidiarity (part of a trend towards de-regulation and de-centralised decision making) with detrimental outcomes for gender equality. In the name of subsidiarity, national and local governments have been given responsibility for childcare, and few developments have then occurred. Financial aid agendas have also been devolved to national governments, which presents organisations seeking to be critical of their approach to, for example, childcare policy with a dilemma as to how negative they can be of the institutions that provide them with funding. It through such a multi-sited perspective that we can better understand the workings of the EU, and the institutions, actors and ideas that operate within and around it.

Whilst this is not an ethnographic study of the EU, its consideration of the role of different actors and discourses suggests how fruitful further research in this direction could be. Ideology is an interesting, but underdeveloped thread that runs through this book, and it would also be compelling to see Kantola develop her approach in this direction. Nevertheless, *Gender and the European Union* is a surprisingly fascinating read.

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